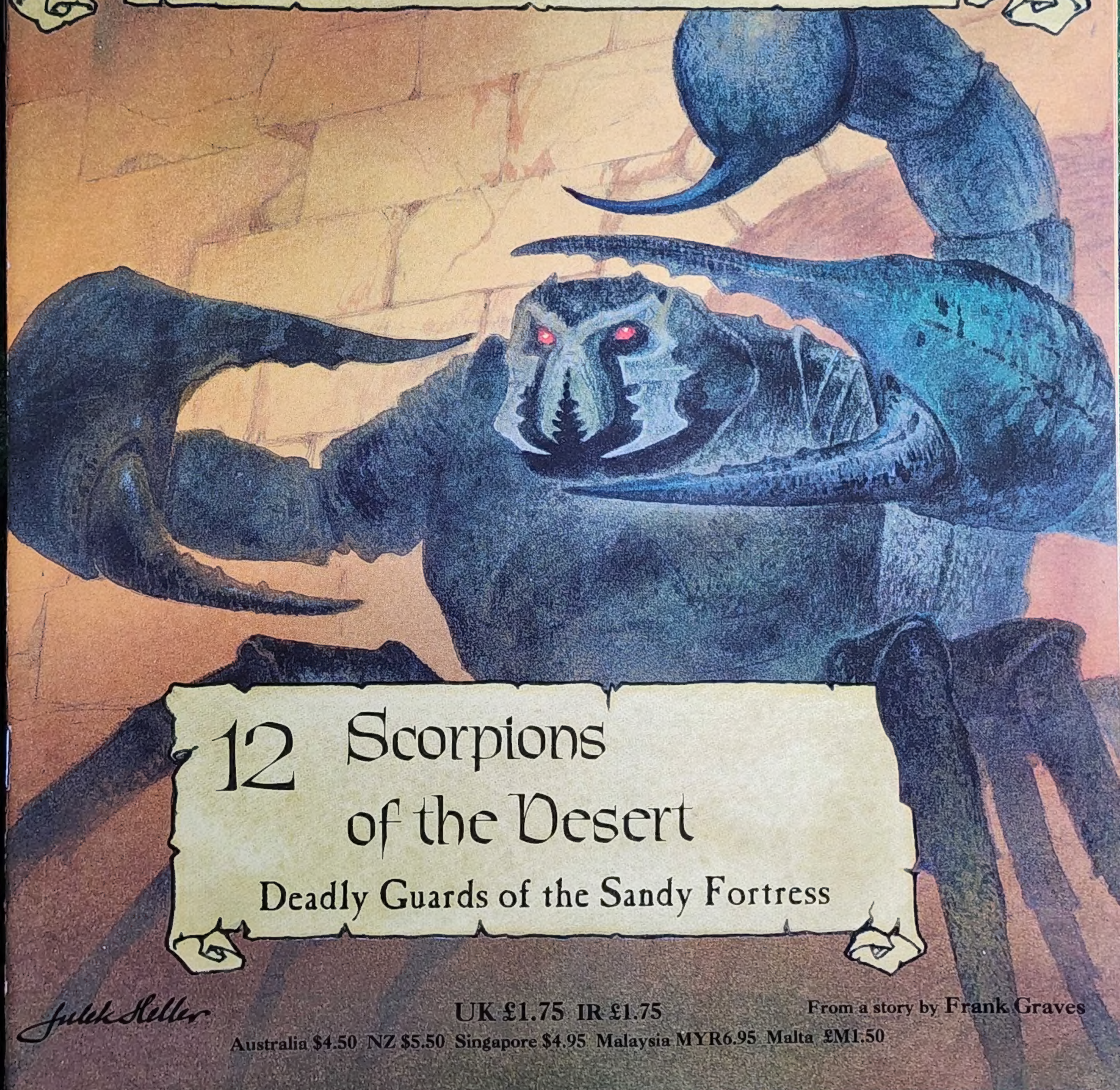
A MARSHALL CAVENDISH COLLECTION 12 IN FORTNIGHTLY PARTS

The Ancestral Trail

AN EPIC STORY OF MYTHS, MAGIC AND MONSTERS



12 Scorpions of the Desert

Deadly Guards of the Sandy Fortress

Julek Heller

UK £1.75 IR £1.75

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From a story by Frank Graves

On the Twelfth Day . . .

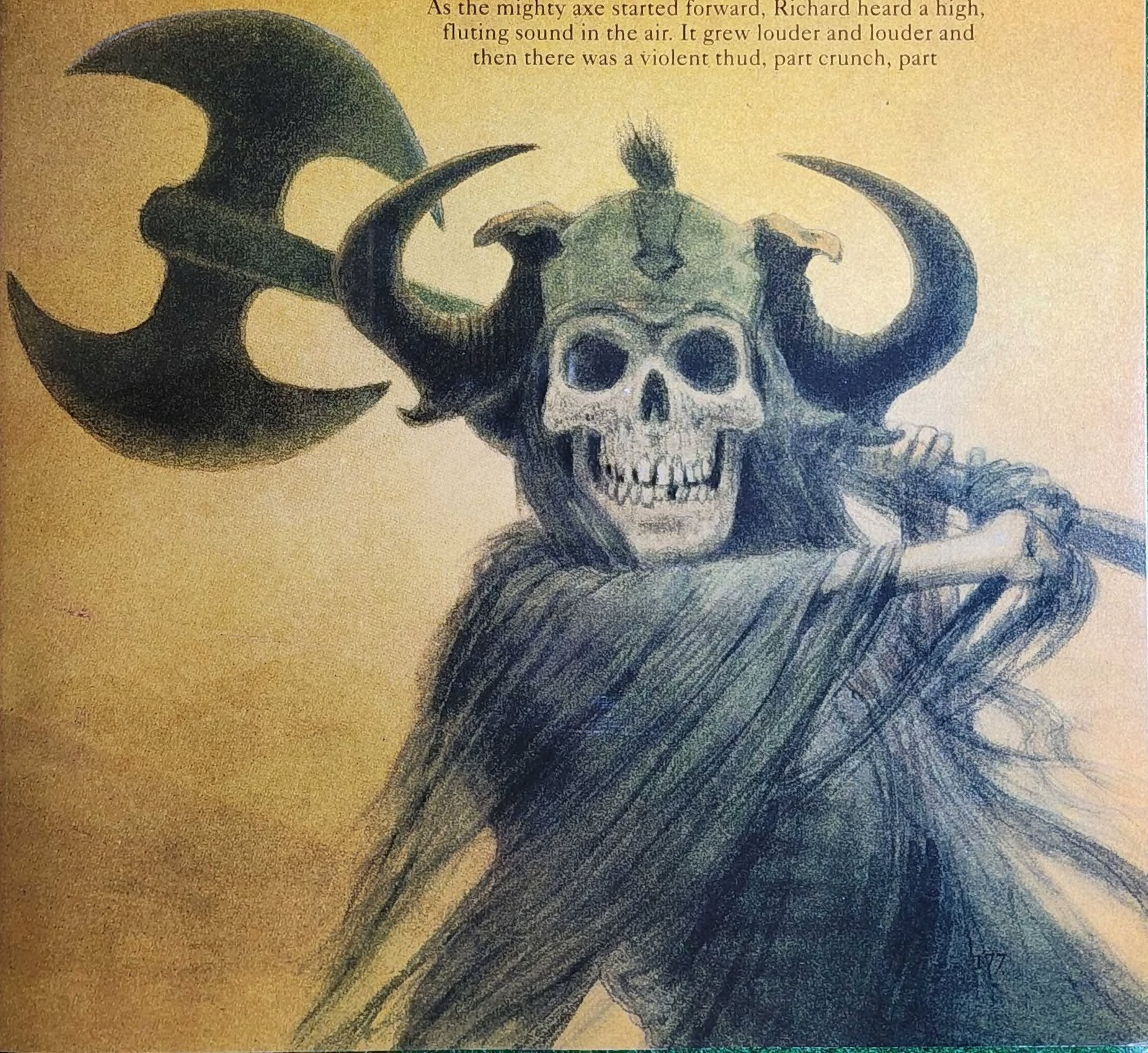
Mirage city in the sand,
Out of sight but close at hand,
Hides the fairest in the land.
Corridors of staring eyes
In streets of half-forgotten sighs
Lead them to the golden prize.
Travellers fight pincered might,
Cobra's Keep a dark surprise.

Never had Richard seen such rage. As he and his companions stood by the boneman, Klaw's fury at losing Kika was plain. Even so, the snake-like speed of Klaw's hand took Richard by surprise. A skeletal fist gripped his neck and for a second he stared into dark, cavernous eyes, then he was dropped on to the rocks alongside Orkan and Melek.

"So, it is the Chosen One!" Klaw snapped at Richard. "Maybe the day hasn't been wasted after all."

The three companions watched in terror as Klaw grabbed a huge, double-headed battle axe from one of his bone warriors. He swung it back in preparation for the death sweep. This time, there was no escape.

As the mighty axe started forward, Richard heard a high, fluting sound in the air. It grew louder and louder and then there was a violent thud, part crunch, part



squelch, as if someone had trodden on an enormous beetle.

A look of astonishment passed over Klaw's face, then the axe fell from his hands. He stood swaying for a few seconds, before toppling into the sand.

From his chest stuck the feathered shaft of the arrow Kika had taken from Orkan's quiver. The arrow had pierced Klaw's bony armour and plunged deep into the rotting mass that had once been his heart. An evil-smelling yellow ooze was seeping up and out of the wound.

The companions breathed a sigh of relief. It took them a few moments to realize that Klaw's bone warriors, with their leader dead, had disintegrated in lifeless heaps around them.

A FRIEND RETURNS

Kika landed neatly among the bones.

"Here's your bow, Orkan," the Guardian said. "It served us well."

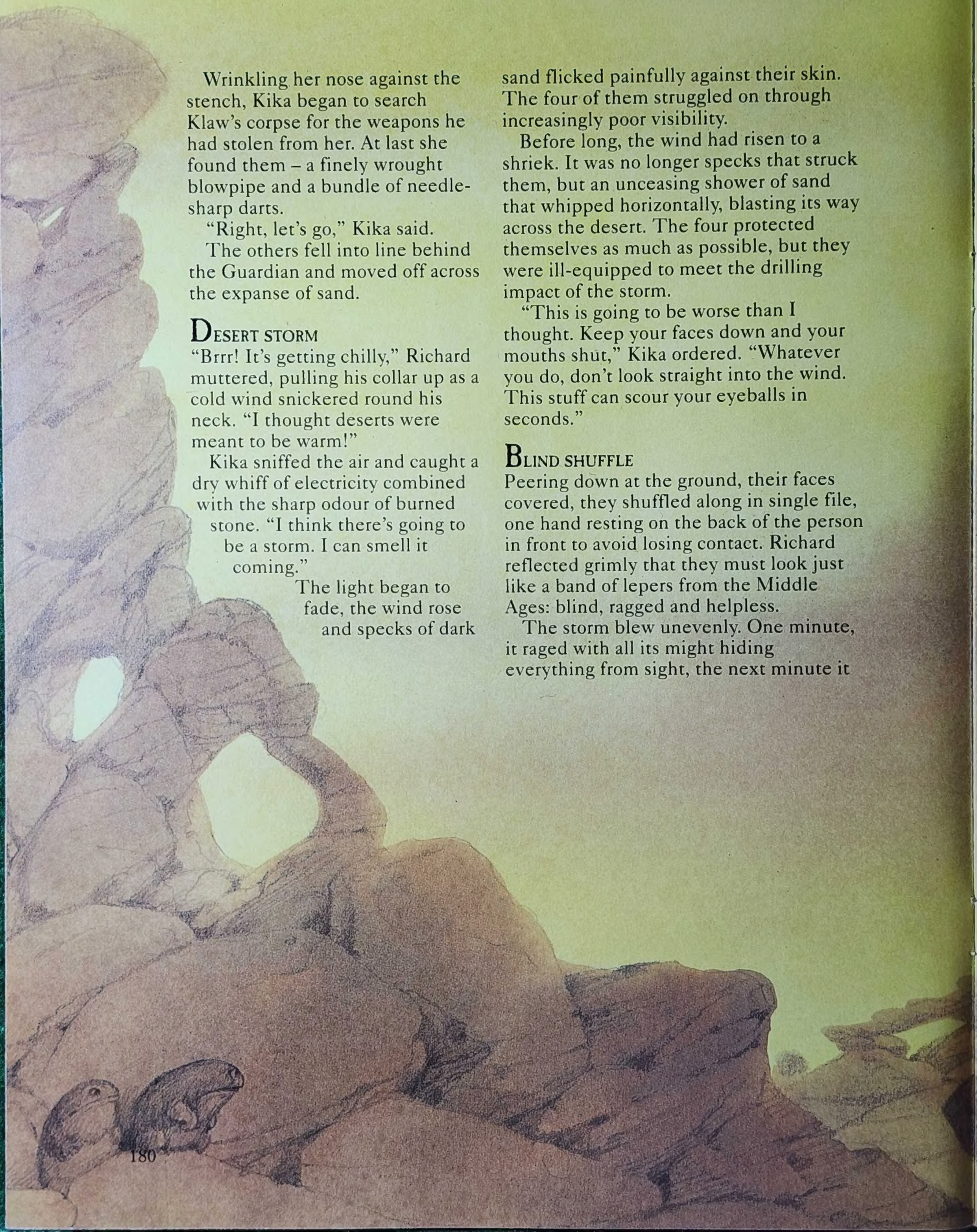
Orkan's jaw fell open as he numbly accepted the bow.

"We thought you'd run off and left us," Richard blurted out in bewilderment and gratitude.

"I had to get to the mountains to find the potion I needed," Kika smiled. "There is a rare bush whose berries contain the only poison capable of killing Klaw. I smeared some over Orkan's arrow and came back as quickly as I could. I didn't even stop to tend my leg, but I did get what I needed for it."

Kika produced a handful of herbs and berries, and mixed them into a poultice. She slapped the sticky mess on to her wound. The effect was instantaneous.

"That's better," she sighed. "There's just one more thing to do before we set off for Sand City."



Wrinkling her nose against the stench, Kika began to search Klaw's corpse for the weapons he had stolen from her. At last she found them – a finely wrought blowpipe and a bundle of needle-sharp darts.

"Right, let's go," Kika said.

The others fell into line behind the Guardian and moved off across the expanse of sand.

Desert storm

"Brrr! It's getting chilly," Richard muttered, pulling his collar up as a cold wind snickered round his neck. "I thought deserts were meant to be warm!"

Kika sniffed the air and caught a dry whiff of electricity combined with the sharp odour of burned stone. "I think there's going to be a storm. I can smell it coming."

The light began to fade, the wind rose and specks of dark sand flicked painfully against their skin. The four of them struggled on through increasingly poor visibility.

Before long, the wind had risen to a shriek. It was no longer specks that struck them, but an unceasing shower of sand that whipped horizontally, blasting its way across the desert. The four protected themselves as much as possible, but they were ill-equipped to meet the drilling impact of the storm.

"This is going to be worse than I thought. Keep your faces down and your mouths shut," Kika ordered. "Whatever you do, don't look straight into the wind. This stuff can scour your eyeballs in seconds."

Blind shuffle

Peering down at the ground, their faces covered, they shuffled along in single file, one hand resting on the back of the person in front to avoid losing contact. Richard reflected grimly that they must look just like a band of lepers from the Middle Ages: blind, ragged and helpless.

The storm blew unevenly. One minute, it raged with all its might hiding everything from sight, the next minute it

abated into sweeping curtains of sand, through which it was just possible to make out the way ahead. It was during one of these lulls that Richard caught the first sight of their destination.

City of Sand

Up until now, the only view that the travellers had been able to make out from each ridge top was of further ridge tops, shimmering across the desert in endless waves. Then suddenly, as they topped one slope, the storm died down and the scenery changed. Ahead, blurry in the haze, rose a mass of yellow, sand-coloured buildings surrounded by a high wall.

"Sand City," Kika said.

"How come we didn't see the city before?" Richard asked in confusion. "Surely we'd have seen something this big, even with the sand storm."

"Maybe it's a mirage," Melek piped up knowingly.

"No, what you saw before – all those ridges going off into the distance – was the mirage," Kika explained. "Sand City has been here all the time. Good camouflage, isn't it?"

"We'd never have found it on our own," Richard said. "It's lucky we had you to guide us."

Now, as they approached their goal, the landscape worked in their favour. Only when they crossed the top of a ridge did they have to bother with concealment, otherwise they walked fast and free in the shelter of the gullies.

Soon the land began to flatten into a wide featureless expanse that surrounded Sand City on every side. Standing on a rocky outcrop on one of the last ridges, the tired travellers surveyed the walls with dismay. They were high, windowless and accessible only through a single arched gateway. Worse still, the gateway was guarded.

"We'll never get past those," Richard said, horrified by the six creatures that

stood unmoving before the gate.

"They're scorpion guards," Kika said.

Richard peered at the creatures. They were like the scorpions he had seen in books, but larger, much larger. Their narrow, blue-black bodies curved back to a fiercely barbed tail. Only their eyes were different, glowing a deep, murderous red inside shrouded sockets.

Suddenly, the guards changed formation, moving across the sand in a complicated manoeuvre. From where he stood, Richard could hear the skittering tik-tik-tik of their claws on the ground. It was a cold, precise sound that struck a chill deep in his heart.

"Wait here," Kika whispered. "I'll see if I can find another way in."

Low-level recce

The Guardian flew off, skimming along the contours of the land until she had circled out of the guards' line of sight. She swooped up and round the city walls, scanning every inch for a way in.

Then she saw a section where the walls had toppled outwards in a jumbled splay of sandstone. The trio would be able to climb over the rubble and into the city. She flew back and told Richard.

The small party moved off, taking care

not to alert the scorpion guards. Before long, the whole group was peering over a sandy ridge directly opposite the broken wall.

"Looks perfect," Richard whispered. "Were there any scorpions inside?"

"None that I could see," Kika replied. "You go on ahead and I'll keep watch."

Richard went first, running in a crouch over the flat sand until he reached the pile of sandstone. He turned to give a thumbs-up sign, then scrambled into the city. Melek followed. It came to Orkan's turn. He looked up to where Kika was hovering in the air, ready to warn of oncoming scorpions. She signalled the all-clear and he sprang out of cover, running full tilt for the wall.

Sting in the tail

Orkan was halfway to safety when the sound of scuttling scorpion feet carried clearly through the dry atmosphere. Orkan saw the scorpion at the same time as the scorpion saw him. He put on an extra burst of speed and reached the sandstone rubble.

"Faster, Orkan!" Richard shouted encouragement.

It did no good. The guard was faster. The scorpion's tail rose up and stabbed vengefully into Orkan's thigh.

Orkan yelled in pain and slashed out with his sword, slicing into the offending tail as it rhythmically pumped its poison into him. As he

pulled himself to safety, Orkan wrenched the sting, still pulsing a greenish juice, from his flesh and flung it to one side.

Richard and Melek rushed over to help their wounded companion. The only way forward was up some steps. By the time they reached the top, Orkan was feeling dizzy, his limbs were becoming numb. He could feel himself losing consciousness. The last thing he saw was a flurry of wings. From far off he could hear Kika's

voice. "Don't worry," the voice was reassuring. "You'll be all right." Then Orkan blacked out.

"Richard, lance the wound," Kika commanded. "We've got to get the poison out. I've still got some herbs and berries. I can save him."

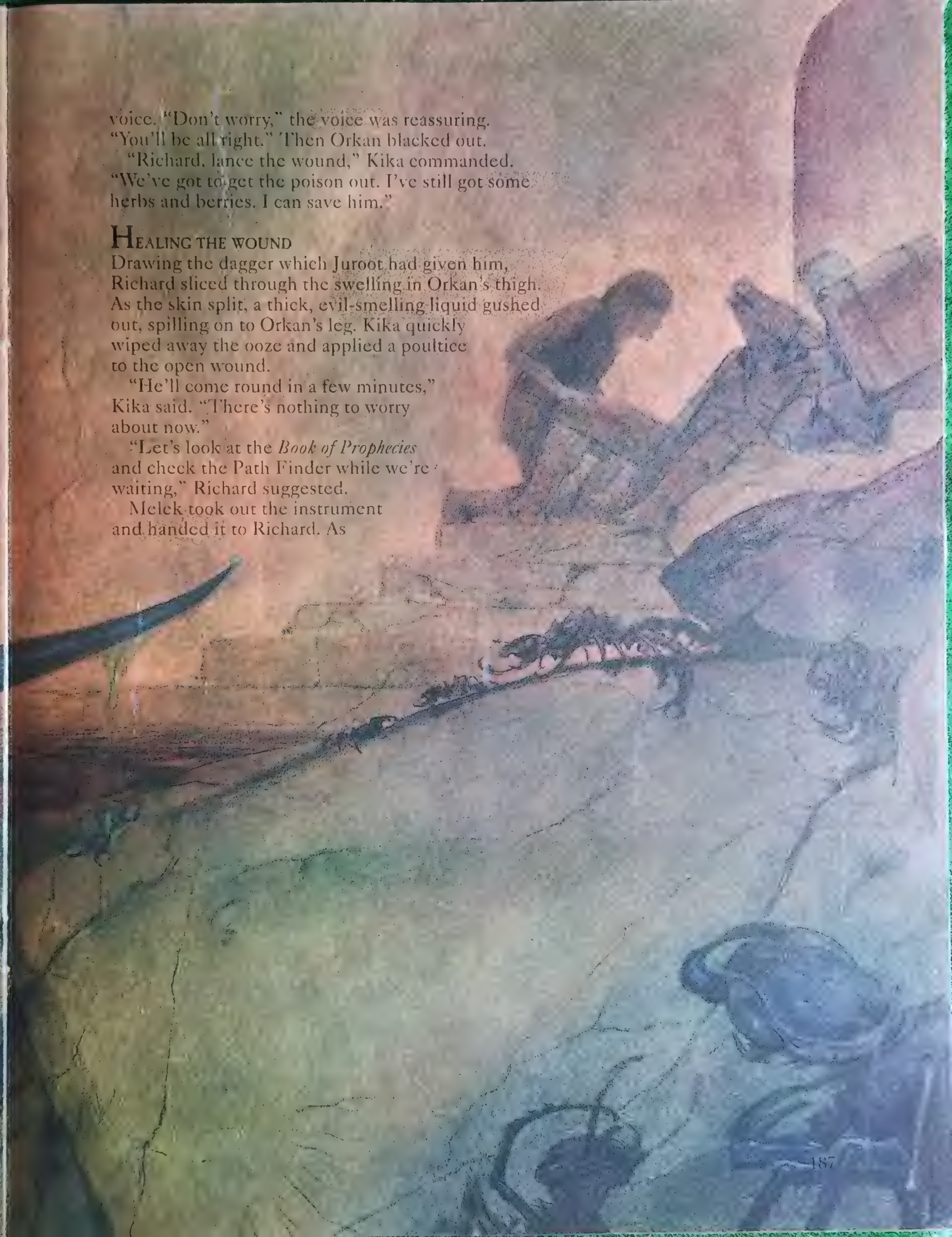
Healing the wound

Drawing the dagger which Juroot had given him, Richard sliced through the swelling in Orkan's thigh. As the skin split, a thick, evil-smelling liquid gushed out, spilling on to Orkan's leg. Kika quickly wiped away the ooze and applied a poultice to the open wound.

"He'll come round in a few minutes," Kika said. "There's nothing to worry about now."

"Let's look at the *Book of Prophecies* and check the Path Finder while we're waiting," Richard suggested.

Melek took out the instrument and handed it to Richard. As



Melek began to read aloud, Richard pointed the instrument towards a nearby tower. The tip of the arrow began to glow golden.

"The pod's in there," Richard murmured. "It must be Cobra's Keep. I don't like the sound of the corridors of eyes. We must take extra care."

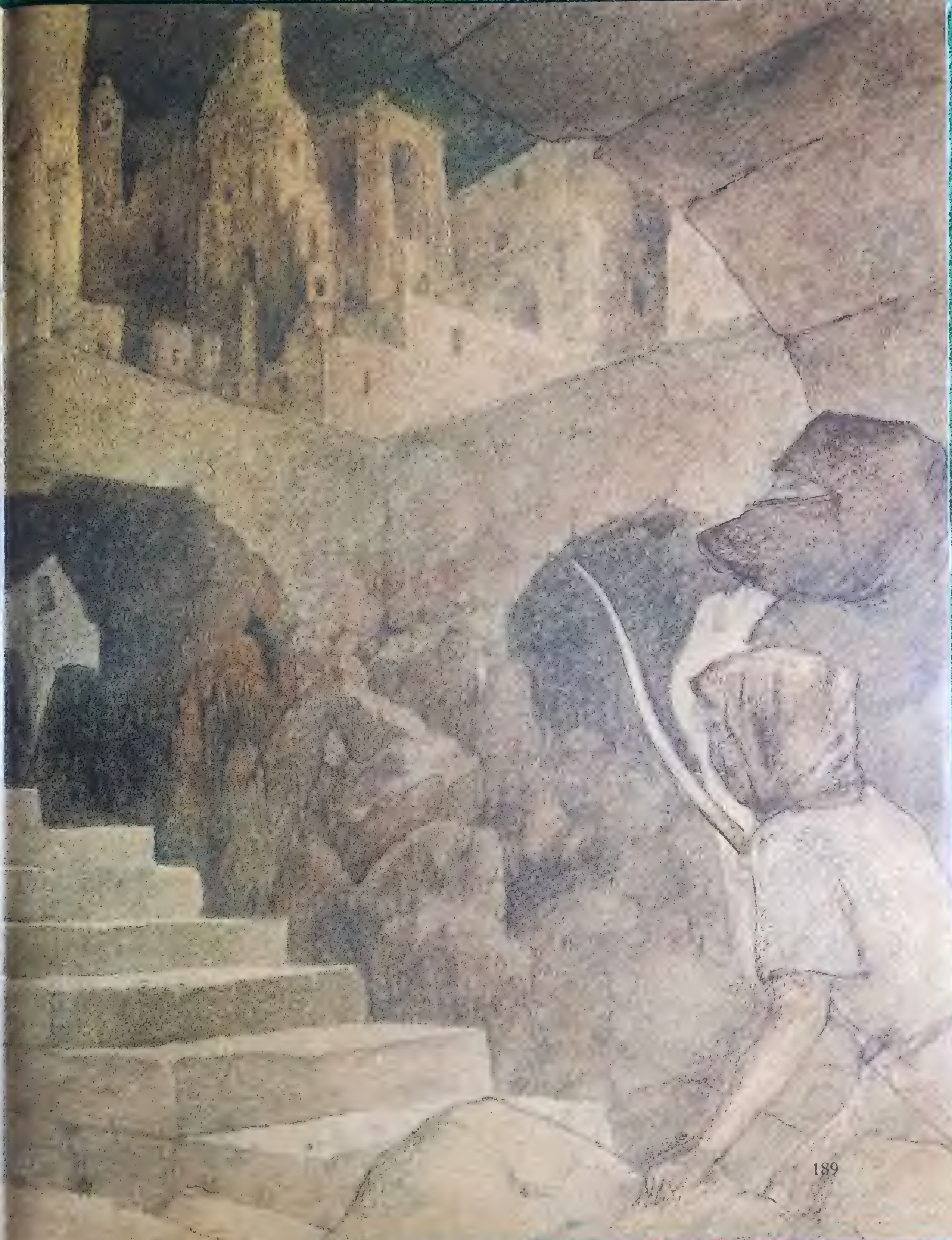
As Richard finished, they heard a gruff rumbling near their feet. Orkan was coming round. He was a bit shaky but otherwise all right.

"Come on!" Richard said. "Let's get to Cobra's Keep and get the pod."

Deserted citadel

The sand storm was now blowing with renewed vigour. The companions adjusted their clothes against the stinging bursts, and set off through the winding streets towards Cobra's Keep. The houses either side looked long since deserted. Shutters flapped wearily from their hinges and now and then, the four heard ominous slithering sounds.

They moved in fits and starts through the winding passages, fitting their speed to the storm's force. When it blew strongest, they shrank into their clothes and crept along like cautious tortoises. When it lessened a little, they loosened themselves, lengthened their stride and made good progress.



Finally the companions emerged on a wide thoroughfare. So far, there had been no sign of any scorpions.

Richard looked down the street, checking either side for signs of movement. He took one step forward and then stopped dead. He heard the familiar tik-tik-tikking sound from his left. Then from his right. Then, from behind him came a fast, staccato rattle as if a whole platoon of scorpions were moving in.

"Run!" Richard shouted. Hardly had the word left his lips when a scorpion stepped out right in front of them.

As if on cue, the sound of scorpion claws clattered out on all sides. Richard, Kika and Orkan drew their weapons, and prepared to make a stand. Out of the billowing clouds of sand emerged evil, black-pincered shapes, red eyes glowing and tails poised ready to strike. The four travellers were surrounded.

Stings and arrows

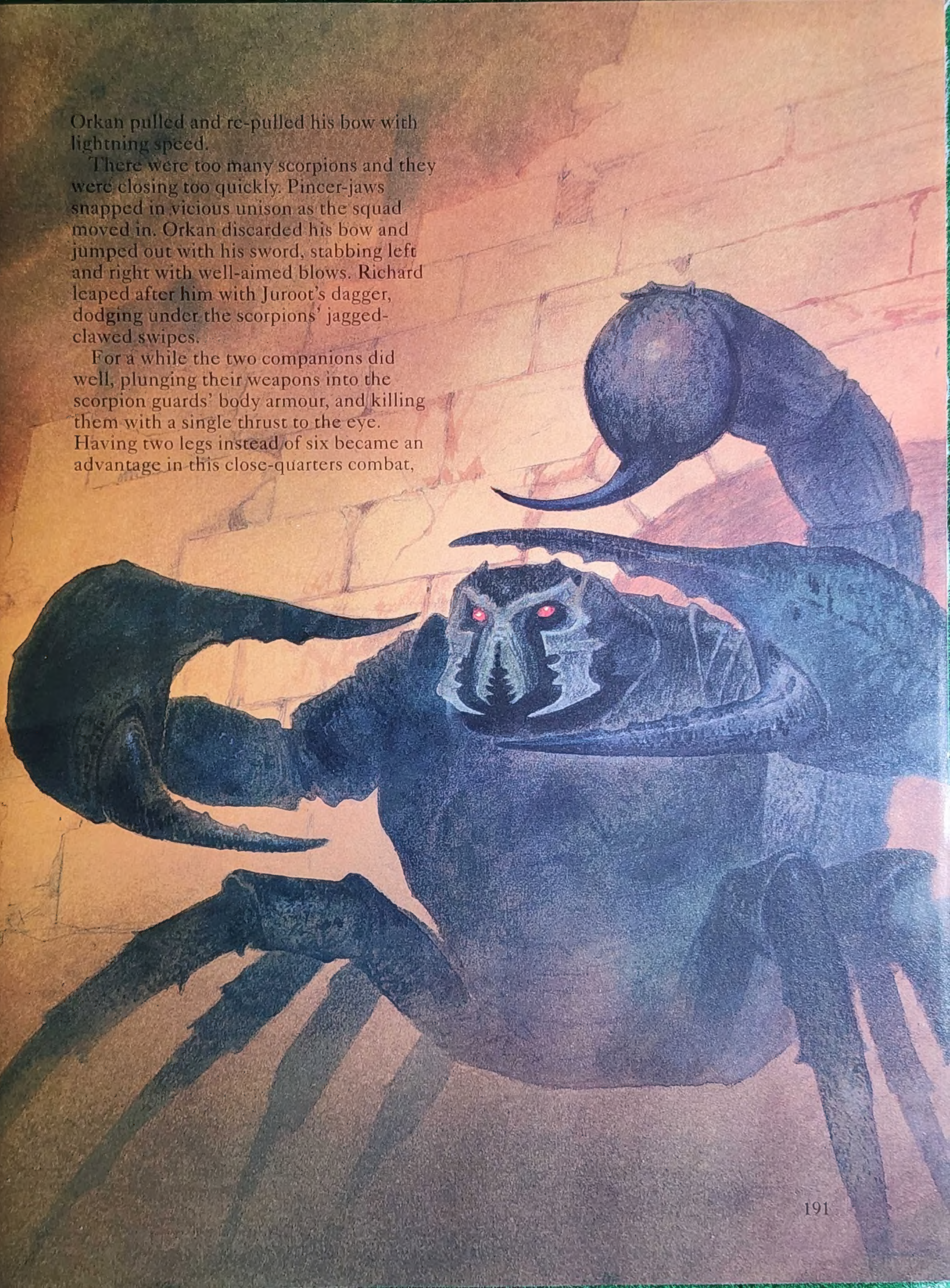
Kika moved fast and purposefully. Before the others had so much as taken a step towards their foe, she had her blowpipe to her lips and was spraying a lethal fan of darts at the enemy.

"Aim for the eyes!" she shouted, reloading her blowpipe. "That's their vulnerable spot." Another rain of darts spat out at the scorpions. This time, it was joined by a slender stream of arrows, as

Orkan pulled and re-pulled his bow with lightning speed.

There were too many scorpions and they were closing too quickly. Pincer-jaws snapped in vicious unison as the squad moved in. Orkan discarded his bow and jumped out with his sword, stabbing left and right with well-aimed blows. Richard leaped after him with Juroot's dagger, dodging under the scorpions' jagged-clawed swipes.

For a while the two companions did well, plunging their weapons into the scorpion guards' body armour, and killing them with a single thrust to the eye. Having two legs instead of six became an advantage in this close-quarters combat,



and Richard found that he could swerve and slide through the scorpion's defences with relative ease.

Melek and Kika did their best to help, but they were not equipped for the kind of hand-to-hand fighting needed now. Kika hovered in the air and used her blowpipe whenever she could. Melek ran to and fro, trying to dodge the scorpions' tails.

In the grip of evil

As Richard and Orkan slashed their way into the blue-black ranks, a thin scream filled the air. All three fighters looked in Kika's direction at once. The Guardian was thrashing feebly in the air, caught in the grip of a scorpion bigger than any Richard had seen so far.

"Help!" Kika screamed again.

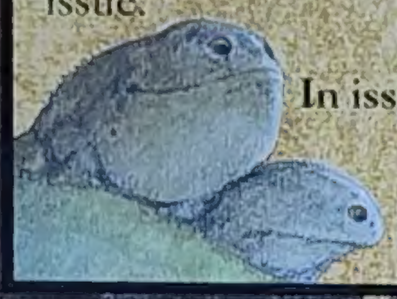
The scorpion's red eyes glowed malevolently. Then his pincer closed tighter and tighter.

Shoomi's Sanctuary

Come into this ancient domain and use your powers of observation to find . . .

Shoomi and Shoobi

These friendly little creatures are still on our heroes' trail. Watch out for them again. They are hiding somewhere in the illustrations in this issue.



In issue 11, Shoomi and Shoobi remained hidden in the cave on the inside front cover.

3-Minute Challenge

Mask of Evil

Can you find two fragments of the Evil One's Mask in the illustrations in less than three minutes?

In issue 11, the fragment was hidden on page 167.

Did you beat the challenge? If not, try again this time!

Monsters and Magic

After you have enjoyed Scorpions of the Desert, read about Isis and the Servants of the Sun on your cards from *Morbane's Book of Monsters and Magic*. Which of the characters do you think the Scorpion guards are based on?

In issue 11, Klaw was based on the skeletons born of Dragon's Teeth, conjured up by sorcery to fight the hero Jason.

Puzzle Map

Cut out the next three puzzle pieces and fit them on to your Ancestral World map poster.

Power of Evil

Cut out the three letter blocks and wait for the clue that will help you form the letters into a phrase revealing the source of the Evil One's power.

Competition details will appear in future issues.

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15
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An Epic Story of Myths, Magic and Monsters
13 Dragora's Inner Sanctum
Fight to the Death in Cobra's Keep
Judith Keller

In Issue 13

Dragora's Inner Sanctum

A triple-headed monster guards a precious pod, deep in Cobra's Keep. How will our heroes overcome this deadly serpent of evil?

plus

- From *Morbane's Book of Monsters and Magic*, two stories about serpents with very special powers.
- More tokens, locator cards and a location recorder for **The Ancestral Trail** role-playing game.

Coming in Issue 14

Hulkan, the Mole Monster

The earth rumbles and shakes, then a giant mole monster appears. But it is not the beast's size our heroes have to fear. Hulkan has a power far more frightening!

plus

From Morbane two stories about mischief-makers • A puzzle piece for the Ancestral World map • More pieces for the role-playing game.

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